

The People's Duty to Justice

Public can tell court how to improve jury service

September 5, 2006

Next to voting, there is no more important responsibility for the citizens of a democracy than to serve on a jury. Yet the first reaction of many people when called for jury duty is "how can I get out of this?"



That may be due to a perception that a lot of time and tedium will be involved for an experience that is ultimately frustrating because of courtroom rules and procedures. While it is true that the reality of jury service is far removed from the quick and dramatic episodes of television, it also is improving as more judges and lawyers take time to explain things better to jurors and adjust procedures to keep them engaged, such as allowing jurors to take notes or submit questions to the court that the lawyers did not ask.

The Michigan Supreme Court is now inviting public comment on a series of proposals to change the jury experience and, ultimately, produce better verdicts. Potential changes include allowing jurors to request a view of the scene of a crime or other "material event" in a case, to keep notes and take them into their deliberations room, submit questions for witnesses and keep "case notebooks" that include exhibits, instructions and other documents, and allowing judges to sum up evidence and comment on the relative weight of it.

Judges already have some leeway to allow such practices, but the justices are considering whether to incorporate all, some or any of them -- or some new ones that may be suggested -- into Michigan's General Court Rules for criminal and civil trials.

Here's how you can participate:

The proposed changes can be

viewed at the "One Court of Justice" Web site,
www.courts.michigan.gov/supremecourt/Resources/Administrative/2005-19.pdf.

To comment on them, write to

the Supreme Court Clerk, P.O. Box 30052, Lansing, MI 48909 or e-mail MSC_clerk@courts.mi.gov.
The deadline is Nov. 1.

This is a worthwhile undertaking that should be of particular interest to anyone who has ever served on a jury and can offer some insight to the court. But the comment is an opportunity for all citizens to be heard, not just lawyers, and the public ought to take advantage of it. After all, you never know when you might be called to serve -- or when your fate might be in the hands of a jury.

Copyright © 2006 Detroit Free Press Inc.